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ABSTRACT

Communication patterns and language use in four national and multinational companies operating in Taiwan illustrate the potential for communication problems when more than one language is in use. The companies include Texas Instruments, Kaohsiung Monomer Company, Ltd., Bank of America, and Cheng-Yia International Corporation. In the four companies, the English and Chinese language proficiency levels vary greatly among management and workers, with pressures for use of a particular language occurring at different work levels and in different work relationships. It is recommended that English language instruction in Taiwan focus more on developing skill levels, providing situational information about language use, and developing interpersonal communication skills for use within the workplace. Improved Chinese language training for English-speaking expatriates in Taiwan is also recommended. (MSE)

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# THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN NATIONAL AND MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISES IN TAIWAN

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# The Role of Language in National and Multinational Enterprises in Taiwan

## Introduction

The multiplicity of language use has a constraining influence on the operation of international business. To a large degree, successful international business prectice depends on communication, and improved language skills can be a prime means of improving communication. Mr. Nokasona (1983), Japanese Prime Minister, attributed Japanese success in international business to Japanese businessmen possessing superior knowledge of culture and language of the foreign countries.

International communication has been recognized as the most striking potential problem when dealing in business with people whose languages differ from your own. In Taiwan, communication situations in most of the multinational corporations (MNCs) are, for example, foreign expatriates communicating with subordinates, or vise versa, subordinates communicating with other subordinates outside of Taiwan, the import-export firms communicating with the personnel of suppliers and buyers outside the counry, and so forth.

To improve the company productivity, there are a variety of training programs which can achieve the goal. Language training, however, is considered to be a good investment in international operations. Tenneco's example (Terpstra, 1986) demonstrates that language training is conducive to both subordinates and superiors to increase workers' motivation and morale. Knowing a foreign language needs to be considered as an inevitable factor to facilitate

participation in the world economy. An effective language training program should (a) diagnose language proficiency in different language skills, and (b) tailor the program to meet the needs of each individual company in terms of their job requirement.

This paper describes the overall communication patterns that arise in four national-multinational corporations where more than one language is used the communication difficulties which occurred in these four companies. Based on the situations of language use and communication problems, the paper concludes with recommendations on the improvement of language and communication skills.

## The Role of Languages in Four Companies

### (The Use of Languages)

Texas Instruments (TI), a well-known American company, operates a manufacturing plant in Taipei County. Of the four companies, Chinese personnel of TI possess the highest second-language communicative proviciency. The relatively high level of English proficiency is related to the company hiring policy and the frequencies and needs of using English in task-related communication. As a company hiring policy, all exempt personnel must possess basic English language competency, both written and oral. Another factor is the frequency of using a second language (English) in task-related communication with other TI personnel outside of Taiwan. In TI, the reciprocal work relationships with overseas non-Chinese speaking personnel dictate that Chinese personnel conduct work-related communication, of course, in English. Consequently, the TI work environment is characterized by individuals who have an

initial command of English and whose language proficiencies are maintained through work relationships with English speaking personnel.

There are counter-pull factors that are concurrently both increasing and retarding the English proficiencies. The increasing factor is external to the immediate Taiwanese work environment. In TI, Chinese personnel from first-level engineers to mid-to-upper-level managers had to integrate their technical work projects with other TI engineering, research, manufacturing, and marketing personnel outside Taiwan. The accommodating language in all these communications is English. However, with the decreased number of English speakers and increased number of Chinese personnel in managerial positions which has taken place in the sixteen years TI has been in Taiwan, there is an informal pressure to communicate more and more in Chinese in TI's internal operation. The Chinese personnel profess their desire to improve their English skills, but there is a strong tendency to use their first language. In TI, the challenge is to maintain and to develop second language skills. These second language skills are essential to achieving efficient integration of Taiwanese operations with those of other TI facilities around the world.

Kaohsiung Monomer Co., Ltd. (KMC) is a joint venture of British multinational corporation ICI and Chinese government run chemical and petroleum corporations. In this joint venture, the top level manager (GM) is English. Sixty out of 80 Chinese personnel are factory workers. These factory personnel have extremely limited

second language skills. Company policies and memos are either translated into or written in Mandarin before these written communications are transmitted to these personnel. When the English speaking GM walks around the plant, he is limited to the most basic conversations because of the mutual lack of second language skills.

The office staff, consisting of five managers and technical personnel and six secretaries, possess a fairly good command of English. The written communication is primarily conducted in English except for informal memos. Only the financial manager who maintains relationships with Chinese banks reports that her correspondence was written or received in Chinese.

The office personnel regularly transact their work in Chinese and English. Oral communication is mostly in Chinese or Taiwanese, while written work is mostly in English. KMC managers, engineers, and secretaries have high-level written language skills which are refined and continually developed in day-to-day work relationships. The oral English abilities are latent, as these personnel do not get frequent practice in speaking English while at work.

Bank of America (BOA), a well-known American bank, serves both multinational firms and Chinese firms. The loan division makes approximately 70% of its loans to Chinese clients. While the paperwork is in English and Chinese, the oral communication with Chinese clients is, of course, Chinese. The Chinese loan officers, 40% having American MBA degrees, both speak and write English; these same officers, however, do not conduct most of their day-to-day business-tasks in English, except for the loan approval meeting. As

with KMC, these Chinese personnel have latent English language oral skills.

The loan division environment can be characterized as a dominant Chinese language environment with an overlay of English. In this environment, the Chinese receive enough practice in spoken English to maintain but not to improve their English skills. On the other hand, written English proficiencies are refined and developed through task-related demands.

Cheng-Yia International Corporation (CYIC) is a family-owned Chinese export firm, producing electrical cord and wiring. The company's internal language, both written and oral, is Chinese. Some company personnel, however, possess foreign language skills because of the firm's external relationships.

Out of 150 employees, only export managers, production managers and secretaries have English language competencies. The company hiring policy is to hire individuals with English language competency that is required for their positions. In interacting with Japanese customers and suppliers, interpreters are used to complete the communication requirements.

Although the environment can be characterized as overwhelmingly Chinese, English language skills are still needed in sensitive positions. The firm's external relationships dictate the use of foreign languages, mainly English and Japanese.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

English education in Taiwan, in general, provides students with ome reading comprehension and basic writing skills, but not oral/

aural skills. With this kind of practice, the language training needs to focus on three dimensions: (a) development of skill levels, (b) situational information about language use, (c) development of communication skills to communicate effectively with superiors and peers.

(a) Development of Skill Levels

Of four language skills, the development of listening skills has revealed an ever-increasing attention in language teaching. Pedagogically, listening comprehension skills need to be singled out because, to some extent, the acquisition of other skills will not automatically lead to aural comprehension (Weissenrieder, 1987). Much experimental work in second language acquisition, such as that of Krashen, suggests that listening comprehension is inevitable to production skills. Surprisingly, Belasco (1981) noted that students who are relatively fluent in terms of production are often lost when they find themselves on the other side of the communicative act. Effective communication has to be a two-way channel.

To build up listening comprehension skills for those mid-to upper-level managers, it is suggested that radio and T.V. broadcasting on newsbriefs or some other special occasions may be helpful to broaden their acoustic training. Pedagogically, Oller and Oller's (1983) cyclical treatment was found to be helpful in making input more comprehensible. This method breaks down the whole passage into several cycles. Students are asked to focus on one or two simple perception or comprehension tasks in each of several listenings. With the aid of instructor guidance, each cycle builds on the

knowledge accumulated in the previous cycle until ultimate comprehension goals have been achieved.

As for the development of oral proficiency, semi-controlled or guided topic discussion can be conducive to the Chinese personnel. The topics can be current events, sports, and task-related. The purpose of training is to improve not only their spoken English, but also their communication skills, such as debating, agreeing, etc.

Writing skills is another important area of language skills which needs to be emphasized in the language training. With the basic command of grammatical competence, most Chinese personnel should be able to handle internal company memos. However, writing of technical project reports, internal progress reports to foreign expatriates or division heads, and minutes and progress reports to the headquarters may create a communication problem. Writing is one way of reflecting logical thinking. With the different ways of logical thinking between Chinese and Americans, non-native speakers may interpret the writing differently. Designing a language course to tackle the problem of how to write business letters, technical reports in general, and to emphasize the style of different corporations in specific may be useful. For example, in TI, the writing skill should focus on engineering report writing and formatting; whereas in KMC, the emphasis should be on minutes, office operation and monthly reports to the headquarters. In CYIC, the stress should be on the English business correspondence.

(b) Situational Information About Language Use

Language learning is not complete when the content of a gram-

matical syllable has been mastered (Wilkins, 1979). Knowledge of language development based on linguistic competence fails to fulfill the communicational needs because of its lack of situational relevance. For those Chinese personnel in mid- to upper-levels of managerial positions, they may have a considerable practical command of grammatical structures, but such linguistic competence may be inadequately related to what is needed in the situation. A situational syllabus may be valuable to meet the needs of individual companies to enable Chinese personnel to handle language situations.

(c) Developments of Communication Skills (Sociolinguistic Competence) To Effectively Communicate with Supervisors and Peers.

Sociolinguistic competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the role of the participants and the function of the interaction. Judgments of appropriateness involve more than knowing "what" to say in a situation and "how" to say it. For Chinese personnel, they may deliberately maintain a formal register or an academic style of speech in some situations where a familiar or informal register might be appropriate for native speakers. Thus, a language training program that employs sociolinguistic competence may be found to be conducive for Chinese personnel.

Language Training for Foreign Expatriates

Language training is important: this was the general consensus of the foreign expatriates. Language learning, however, for newly-arrived personnel in Taiwan is difficult. These personnel already have to adjust to a new environment--a new assignment and new

country, and adding an ongoing language course under these circumstances may overburden some individuals. It is suggested that Chinese language training for English personnel can be arranged to provide an intensive course either before departure to the host country or after arriving in the host country. If the training is arranged after arrival, it is suggested that participants be separated from job and adjustment pressure. The content should focus on survival and basic conversation that is to be used for social purposes, such as greetings, phone number, address, monetary system, and "shopping language." It cannot be expected that the foreign expatriates would have the same fluency of the Chinese language as the Chinese personnel have in English. However, knowing the host country's language even a little bit would improve the rapport among employees. They would see the expatriate as one of "them" and would respect him or her more.